

## **The Jewish Miracle**

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A friend of mine used to start off his presentations on Jewish life by saying that he gets depressed reading so many Jewish periodicals, each bringing more warnings of how the Jewish community and Israel are on the verge of collapse or self-destruction. His best antidote was to pick up an anti-semitic newspaper or journal where he would read about how powerful Jews are and how we are taking over the world.

There is certainly a lot of evidence that the forms of Jewish identification that have long characterized engaged, committed Jews are on the decline. Fewer Jews belong to synagogues than 25 years ago. Fewer Jews make annual contributions to the Jewish Federation, the umbrella fundraising and planning agency of the Jewish community. Fewer Jews marry other Jews and establish homes that follow the rhythms practices of Jewish life.

Studies of American Jewish life, such as the widely reported “Portrait of Jewish Americans” put out by the Pew Center two years ago, document the decline. The study found that 22% of American Jews checked the box that said: “Jewish, of no religion”. But among Millennials (born after 1980), that number was 32%. On every variable of Jewish identification, those who identified themselves as “Jewish, of no religion” were less engaged in Jewish practice and Jewish life. Two-thirds of Jews of no religion say that they are not raising their children as Jews in any way.

Yet what I found most fascinating about the Pew study was a paradoxical finding. Ninety-four percent of American Jews proclaimed that they are proud to be Jewish. Eighty percent said that being Jewish was important to their lives.

The paradox is remarkable. If you were running a business and your product got that kind of approval rating, you’d be an overnight millionaire. How are we to account for the disparity between practice and profession? How is it that Jews who do so little about being Jewish, cite it as central to their personal identities? It is a phenomenon that I call the tenacity of Jewish identity.

I got a unique perspective on the tenacity of Jewish identity this past summer. Let me explain the context. Several years ago I launched an international fellowship program for Jewish young adults on Judaism and human rights. The program has hubs in New York, London and Jerusalem with 10 fellows in each hub. We meet monthly for a year and every June we do an 8-day study tour. This year we chose to go to Budapest.

Hungary is a country that, according to leading human rights organizations, is rated as the country most likely to turn from democratic to non-democratic in the near future. The ruling Fidesz party and Prime Minister Victor Orban has been cracking down on liberal NGOs and suspending civil liberties for the past several years. While Jews are increasingly at risk in the country, their situation is far better than that of other groups like the Roma minority, individuals who identify as LGBT, the homeless and refugees.

During our study tour we met with more than 15 NGOs working on human rights issues. More than half of those organizations were founded by or run by Jews even though Jews make up less than 1% of Hungary’s population today. Even more impressive than that is the fact that in the heart of what was Nazi occupied Europe there is an amazing revival of interest in Judaism on the part of Jewish young adults. It manifests itself, not by attending synagogue by largely in endeavors that advance social justice for the poor and vulnerable. Despite the rise of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish

feelings and some very disturbing incidents in much of Europe, these Jews have no intention of leaving their country of birth.

The stories told to us by these young Jews were remarkable. One Jewish activist named Sofia told us that she was totally unaware that she was Jewish until her early twenties when her father died. To her dismay, her mother told her that the funeral would take place at the Jewish cemetery and be officiated at by a rabbi. This is how Sofia discovered that her father was Jewish, as was her mother, even though neither parent ever mentioned it to Sofia and there was not a single Jewish symbol nor ever a Jewish practice observed her entire life.

Sofia described the phenomenon as a common one in East Block countries. Jews who were lucky enough to survive the Holocaust, then experienced the double-whammy of Communism when Jewish identity was again a serious liability. If you were Jewish, you did your best to hide it—from the government, from your place of employment, from your friends and even from your children. It was an accident of birth and the less you did about it, the better.

I heard stories similar to Sofia's when I was invited by the liberal Jewish community of Warsaw to lead their Pesach Seder in 2007. Only after Lech Walesa was elected president in 1990 was it safe for Jewish identity to come out of the closet. Thousands of young adults uncovered stories of how their parents or grandparents were Jews whose identity had been hidden. Many were raised by Christian families after their parents were deported to the concentration camps.

In Poland, it became something of an obsession for young people to research their roots. Some young adults I met did not uncover any Jewish roots, but nonetheless, decided to begin living a Jewish life because it represented something bold, radical, anti-establishment and...not incidentally, a deeply meaningful set of beliefs and practices.

One such young woman was a member of the Board of the congregation I visited—Beit Warsaw. She never missed a Shabbat service and one afternoon, I invited her to tell me her story. She was not Jewish but she had taken every Jewish studies course offered by her university, voraciously read Jewish books and had found in Judaism a faith and a history that she wanted to be part of. She was not interested in converting with the only rabbi in town who was Orthodox. I suggested that she take an *aliyah* to the Torah on the coming Shabbat when I would be leading services and I would announce to the congregation that this was her official induction into the Jewish community. She was ecstatic. When we did it a few days later, there was not a dry eye in the congregation.

When one spends time in Europe and witnesses the re-birth of Jewish life there, the one thought that comes to my mind over and over again is: this is a miracle! The miracle was even in evidence in the group of 30 Jewish young adults who were part of my program. Several told stories of grandparents who survived concentration camps, displaced persons camps, journeyed to every continent on the globe--Asia, South Africa, Australia, South America, North America. In many cases the Jew who was the refugee decided to shed his or her Jewish identity, protecting their children from the horrific fate they endured. But the fact that a generation or two later, their children found their way back to Judaism, or to Israel, is nothing short of a miracle.

Nowhere was this miracle driven home more than on my visit to Berlin, where I travelled with Sandy at the conclusion of our Budapest Study Tour. I had never been to Berlin but the time seemed right. My father, who passed away last year, was born and raised in Berlin and I wanted to retrace the places that he mentioned in the oral history he taped for me about 15 years ago.

Before the trip we identified an Israeli young man named Dekel who moved to Berlin to study German-Jewish history and who moonlighted as a guide for Jews who were trying to retrace their roots. He walked us through the former Jewish neighborhood, which after the war, was part of East

Berlin. It was a thriving Jewish place with schools, an old age home, a community center with a gym, a shelter to provide food and lodging for poor Jews who came from the East to find a better life. We stopped in front of the Grosse Hamburger School which my father started to attend after the Nazis banished Jewish children from the public schools of Berlin in 1934. It is still functioning as a Jewish day school today.

We gave Dekel the address of where my father lived with his parents and two sisters—Lothringer Strasse, 59, apt. 35. It would not be easy to find because the city has been rebuilt since the war and many street names have changed, especially in the former East Berlin. With Dekel's help though, we found the apartment again. We did not try to go in but we did take some photos.

Our next stop took my breath away. I had sent Dekel a copy of a document that our family thought was from the Red Cross. It listed the names of all Jews who were deported to the death camps from Germany and it included the names of my father's mother and younger sister. Dekel brought us to Levy's Toy Store, an upscale shop that was located in a gentrified part of Berlin. In one corner of the store was a display of Judaica totally out of character with the rest of the store. Mr. Levy was simply a committed Jew who used his store for a display of Judaica, much of it not even for sale.

On a display table was a book, not from the Red Cross, but compiled by the Jewish community of Berlin. We turned to the S section. There it was. An entry for my grandmother: Schwarz, Mindel. Maiden name: Neugewurtz. Born in Galicia, Nov. 24, 1894. Residence: Lothringer 59, apt. 35. Deported to Auschwitz, March 6, 1943. Place of death, Auschwitz. Date: Unknown.

And a second entry for my father's 13-year old sister: Schwarz, Paula. Born in Berlin, July 27, 1930. Deported to Auschwitz, March 6, 1943. Place of death, Auschwitz. Date: Unknown.

Because my father never knew the date of death of his mother and sister, he always observed their *yahrzeit* tonight, on Kol Nidre. **I realized that part of what explains the miracle of Jewish survival is the way Judaism makes memory into a sacred act. We take for granted that in most synagogues memorial plaques of loved ones adorn the walls of the sanctuary. It symbolizes the debt we owe to the generations that came before us and increases our commitment to embrace and pass on the Jewish legacy from one generation to the next.**

It must be said that Germany can give the world a lesson in taking full ownership of the crimes of its past. Not only have they paid billions of dollars in reparations to Jews living all around the world, including payments to Israel in the early 1950's which were critical to build the infrastructure of the fledgling state, but the country is filled with monuments and museums telling the story of World War II and the Holocaust. In the early 1990's, a gentile German artist named Gunter Demnig created a small way of reminding German citizens of the Jews who were murdered during WWII. He created small copper plaques that are embedded in the sidewalks in front of houses where Jews once lived. It includes the same information that I found in the book about my father's mother and sister: name, birth place, birth date, date of deportation, place of deportation, date of death, if known. They are called *stolpersteins*, literally "stumbling stones" and there are now over 50,000 of them that can be found in 18 countries in Europe.

As you walk down the street of almost any major European city, you cannot but help to "stumble into history". You are reminded that a Jew once lived there; and there; and there. They were all killed by the Nazis and so too was the entire culture of European Jewry. Even though the Germans lost the war, they largely succeeded in wiping out European Jewry.

But today, even Germany is experiencing "the Jewish miracle". It has developed into a vibrant hub of Jewish life. A few blocks from my father's childhood home stood the second largest synagogue in Europe, the Oranienburger Strasse Neuw Synagogue. My father's family went to a more

Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood but my Dad would tell me about sneaking into the Neuw Synagogue to hear one of the great preachers of Europe, Rabbi Joachim Prinz. Dr. Prinz escaped to the United States in 1937 where he became the rabbi of Temple Bnai Abraham in Newark, NJ. Even more significantly, he became the president of the American Jewish Congress and spoke right before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington. While history remembers the “I Have a Dream” speech, Jews would do well to read or watch Dr. Prinz’s stirring speech in which he compares the crime of American racism to the Nazism he experienced in Berlin.

Sandy and I went to Shabbat services at the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue. It is now a Conservative congregation filled with young people and led by a woman rabbi named Gesa Ederberg, who herself is a convert to Judaism, as is her husband, who is also a rabbi. It is hard to put into words the feeling I had experiencing a joyous Shabbat service in the same synagogue attended by my father. Or the understanding that Jewish life is coming alive once again in the very place that Hitler plotted to exterminate the Jewish people.

**What are we to make of these stories of Jewish revival? And although I have chosen to focus on stories of individual Jewish revival, we must not forget that Israel is a miracle of collective Jewish revival, born out of the ashes of the Holocaust. How can we explain the tenacity of Jewish identity against all odds?**

The Jewish philosopher, Simon Rawidowicz, wrote an essay in the early 1950’s entitled, “Israel: The Ever Dying People”. He makes the case in the essay that there was hardly a generation in Jewish history that did not consider itself to be the final link in Israel’s chain. Each generation grieved not only for itself but for the great past that was going to disappear forever. In countries and historical periods too numerous to list, Jewish communities faced all sorts of tyrants bent on destroying the Jewish people. Yet despite being banished, greatly diminished in size or forced to abandon their religion, Jews found a way to survive and re-build again and again and again. This is the Jewish miracle!

This, I think, explains the paradox of the Pew study of American Jewish life in which fewer and fewer Jews engage in Jewish practice and activities and yet 94% take pride in being Jewish. I regularly meet Jews who cannot point to a single practice in their lives that is uniquely Jewish. But they are not self-hating Jews. Just a little probing will have them launch into a story of their Jewish roots and the pride they have in their Jewish identity.

This is where I think Mordecai Kaplan and Reconstructionism got it so right. By no means did Kaplan dismiss the value of Jewish practice and belief as a vehicle to preserve Jewish identity. But he understood that in the modern world, for most people, the primary driver to Jewish identity was the feeling of being connected to Jewish peoplehood. I dare say that the fact that so many Jews show up for Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur has at least as much to do with our desire to stay connected to our Jewish identity as it does with the noble themes of these holy days or the content of the liturgy.

And herein lies our challenge. We do not live in Europe. We do not pass by memorials on our sidewalks that remind us of a world destroyed. We may be concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism in the world, but it does not really affect us directly. As we become more assimilated and more of our children intermarry, Jewish identity becomes an option, not a given. Which is why, this evening, I chose to tell you a story about the Jewish miracle.

**Each and every one of you is part of this Jewish miracle simply, by virtue of the fact that you are here tonight. To be part of the Jewish miracle means that your life is part of a web of belief, practice and values that goes back hundreds of generations. People spend all kinds of time and money to find greater meaning in their lives, identifying as part of a people that**

**dates back to Abraham and Sarah and that has survived for close to 4000 years is nothing short of miraculous.**

But with miracles, comes responsibility. Lest we fall prey to too much magical thinking here, let us recall the story of Nachshon ben Aminadav. When Moses stood at the shores of the Red Sea with thousands of recently released Hebrew slaves, he saw the approaching Egyptian chariots in pursuit and he saw a foreboding sea in his path. Moses, despairing and likely more than a bit panicked, resorted to praying to God. Nachshon must have been close to the front and he saw the people's leader, Moses, resorting to prayer. He must have believed that Moses was engaging in just a tad too much magical thinking. So he took matters into his own hands and jumped into the Sea. According to the *midrash*, only with that "leap of faith" did the waters part. Now you may want to take that story with a grain of sea salt, but the teaching remains: in Judaism, people, not God, must initiate miracles.

So here is your homework. **Tell the story of the Jewish miracle to your children, to your friends, to your partners. That is the meaning of the *mitzvah* in Deut. ch 6- *v'shinantem l'vanencha*. And even more importantly, find ways to take some of the beautiful practices and ceremonies of Judaism and make them part of your lives. Let your homes bask in the glow of Shabbat candles. Let the Jewish teachings about *chesed* inform how you treat every person with lovingkindness and name it as a Jewish value. Be part of the millennial Jewish commitment to bring greater peace and justice into the world and name it as the Jewish value of *tzedek*. Lord knows how much our world needs these values today.**

Make a commitment that this year, you turn some of that inner Jewish pride into external Jewish doing. It just might bring about a miracle.

Wishing you and your loved ones, a miraculous year.